THE SCOTSMAN
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Student protest disrupts Minister's college visit

By ERIC McKENZIE

THE SCOTTISH education Minister, Mr Michael Forsyth, was jostled and pushed yesterday when he was surrounded by angry students protesting against the poll tax at Glasgow College.

During his two-hour visit to the college, about 100 police, many of them called in after Mr Forsyth's arrival, were on hand to try to control the demonstration. Shouts of abuse were hurled at guests and college officials alike. Two fire engines were called to the college when a fire alarm went off, but it which later proved to be a false alarm.

During Mr Forsyth's visit he moved from one building to another on the campus. Surrounded by detectives, he was pursued by running, shouting students. A visit to a third college block was cancelled, but an official said later it was because the Minister's visit was running behind schedule.

Mr Forsyth later described the demonstrators as hoodlums. He said: "I think it's another manifestation of the militants and extremists which the Labour Party is trying so hard to control within its ranks, getting out of control."

Mr Forsyth's visit marked the official opening of Glasgow College Enterprises Ltd. He said the college was setting up a company in an attempt to impress on the business community, and the community outside, the very real skills and services it has to offer.

"It's a pity these hoodlums should be creating an unfortunate impression of the college which in no way reflects the day to day position. I'm not concerned for myself, but I'm concerned for the impact it might have on what is a very enterprising initiative, designed to enable the college to expand its range of functions and to offer more opportunities for youngsters — and allow others" (with his head cocked towards the demonstrators) "to benefit from higher education."

During his visit, Mr Forsyth, who is also Scottish health Minister, had a moment of relaxation when he was shown a new way of lifting patients from a hospital bed without possible injury to nurses, which has been pioneered by the college's health and nursing department. He remarked that that was a more impressive student demonstration.

"The other form of student demonstration is certainly running the risk of injuring someone, and it certainly and regrettably will injure the college because of the impression it creates."

Dr Stan Mason, acting director of Glasgow College (formerly Glasgow College of Technology), and chairman of the company, apologised to Mr Forsyth at the start of the opening ceremony. Against a background of shouts and chants outside the building, Dr Mason said he had it on good authority that many of the protesters had been imported from other places, and were not all students of the college.

It was at that point the fire alarm went off in the college's seven-storey George Moore building. While the guests — numbering more than 50 — remained seated, the rest of the building was evacuated. But within minutes the alarm was switched off and the ceremony continued.

The college's students' association, which organised the demonstration, later rejected claims of outsiders taking part.

"We organised the protest to demonstrate to Mr Forsyth the strength of feeling students have against the poll tax and the threat of student loans coming in instead of adequate grants," Mr Paul Hay, vice-president of the association, said.

He added: "It's not true most of the students were from outside. There were representatives from Strathclyde University, Jordanhill College, Clydebank College, and the Scottish branch of the National Union of Students. Of the 300 that were there, I would say 290 of them were students of Glasgow College."

Meanwhile, at the opening, Mr Forsyth praised the initiative for setting up Glasgow College Enterprise, saying that colleges needed to have even closer links with industry and to have the capacity to react quickly to the changing demands being placed on them, without the need constantly to seek approval from some higher authority.

The colleges would be given freedom to manage their own financial affairs. The Scottish Education Department is also reviewing its controls over the academic staffing of colleges, and he has no doubt that everyone will see a major reduction in the extent of those controls.

"All this reform is designed to give the staff and governors of this college a greater say over the direction of this institution."

T/SOR/14018

Student protest mars launch of college company

Pictures: STUART PATERSON

Michael Forsyth runs the gauntlet.

Students protesting against Government plans for loans and the community charge.

By ELIZABETH BUIE

SCOTTISH Education Minister Mr Michael Forsyth yesterday ran the gauntlet of several hundred students protesting against student loans and the poll tax on a visit to Glasgow College to launch a sales research company.

Mr Forsyth, surrounded by security men and police, was jostled and pushed but later blamed the disturbance on "hoodlums" from outside the college.

He said: "I understand that quite a number of the people demonstrating were not, in fact, students here at all. This is another manifestation of the militants and extremists that the Labour Party are trying to control in their ranks getting out of hand."

An initial police presence to oversee the demonstration was increased to an estimated 100 policemen and the fire brigade attended the college when a fire alarm was set off.

"It is a pity that these hoodlums should have given such an unfortunate impression of the college which in no way reflects its day-to-day position.

"I am not concerned for myself but I am concerned that it should have harmed a very enterprising initiative designed to help the college expand its range of functions," Mr Forsyth said.

With a wry smile, he admitted to having taken part in a demonstration while a student at St Andrews University.

"I don't think it was quite the kind you would classify as a demonstration. It was in support of pensioners under the last Labour government when pensions were cut in real terms."

Dr Stan Mason, acting director of the college and chairman of Glasgow College Enterprises Ltd, the company which Mr Forsyth launched before college members, businessmen and industrialists, apologised for the "rent a crowd" shouting outside.

"Many of them have been imported from outside — they are not students of ours — although some among them must be our future captains of industry, and it is interesting to reflect on that," he said.

Later, two of the student organisers of the demonstration dismissed as "absolute nonsense" claims that "boot boys" had been brought in.

The protest had been organised jointly by the Students' Representative Council, the College Labour Club, the students' union and the Mature Students' Association, said Mr Dougie Blackstock, acting chairman of the Glasgow College Labour Club.

Between 10 and 20 of a crowd of more than 300 demonstrators were from other local colleges, said Mr Paul Hay, vice-president of the Glasgow College Students' Association.

Mr Hay said students' union president Mr Sean Campbell had been refused the opportunity to speak to Mr Forsyth for five minutes, and when this was reported to the students "a feeling of unrest" had arisen.

Mr Hay also said that the demonstration organisers had instructed the students not to set off fire alarms. "We suggest it was the authorities who set off the alarm in order to clear the building," he said.

A spokesman for Strathclyde Police said later they put the number of demonstrators at around 400. There were no apprehensions.

In his speech Mr Forsyth praised Glasgow College, formerly known as Glasgow College of Technology, for setting up Glasgow College Enterprises (GCE).

The technology-based company takes the form of four centres of excellence — business development, industrial efficiency, industrial bulk solids handling, and environmental and occupational safety.

Each will offer the support of consultancy, training, product development and technological updating to commercial and industrial clients.

Mr Forsyth emphasised the need for central institutions to meet industry's need for skilled people and to keep courses and teaching methods up to date and relevant to industry.

"If they are to do so, the colleges need to have even closer links with industry and they must have the capacity to react quickly to the changing demands being placed on them, without the need constantly to seek approval from some higher authority.

"Earlier this month, I made new regulations to amend the composition of the governing bodies of the CIs — designed to strengthen the representation of employers.

"Next year we shall be allocating grant to the colleges according to the number of students.

"The colleges will be given a new freedom to manage their own financial affairs. The department is also reviewing its control over the academic staffing of the colleges and I have no doubt that we shall see a major reduction in the extent of these controls."

T/SOR/40/8

THE GLASWEGIAN Thursday

The secret of Thistle's winning habit

DIVINE intervention was the key to Partick Thistle's 1-0 victory over Celtic ...

Or so the five Mad Monks of Firhill would have you believe.

Scotland's most bizzare supporters returned to the terraces for Thistle's first home game of the New Year.

It was all a plan to get Thistle on to a winning habit in 1994 by, "exorcising the evil spirits from Firhill".

They spent the 90 minutes beating themselves with Jags scarves to purge the bad luck from the park.

The lifelong fans, led by "Brother" Colin Monie, 27, blame manager John Lambie for their religious New Year ritual.

Colin said: "Three years ago, he said the fans weren't getting behind the team."

The other monks are Andy Howie, 23, Jamie Howie, 18, John Frew, 30 and Ian Smith, 34.

They derived the group from the nickname Mad Monk given to ex-Jags hero Denis McQuade.

He quit the priesthood before embarking on a colourful career at Firhill – and even scored in the legendary 4-1 win over Celtic in the 1971 League Cup Final.